

## SAS<sup>2</sup> and the Ineffable: Communicating with Sadhus

Farhad Mazhar, Policy Research for Development Alternatives (UBINIG), Farida Akhter (UBINIG) and Daniel Buckles (Carleton University)

### Key Words

Social Domain, Freelisting, Ranking, Rating, Forum, Bangladesh, International Development, Spirituality, UBINIG, Sadhus, Fakir Lalon, knowledge practices, Participatory Action Research

### Context

*Sadhus* are people related to various spiritual schools and practices inspired by Bhakti, Sufi, or syncretic traditions in Bangladesh. Many Sadhus are spiritual followers of Fakir Lalon Shah, a key political and philosophical figure from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Lalon followers are opposed to all forms of social hierarchy (gender, class, caste, etc.) and violence against nature.

Sadhus articulate their ideas and values in songs and lifestyle choices. According to the Lalon tradition, spiritual practice is understood as the conscious cultivation of the human capacity to communicate and connect with 'others' (human and non-human). The practice is (a) intersubjective (communication or dialogue between subjects); (b) reflective (allowing the outside world to make claims on or mobilize the thinking capacity of human beings) and; (c) contemplative (the self communicating with the self, manifest in critical thinking). For Sadhus, oral communication involves creating the conditions for multiple meanings to emerge in dialogue or unfold through contemplation and reflection. It does not mean simply delivering pre-existing ideas through the spoken word.

It is not clear how literate cultures can meaningfully interact with this oral culture and its complex knowledge-creation practices. The socio-constructivist features of SAS<sup>2</sup>, which emphasize the importance of people constructing their own social worlds, may offer a means for meaningful communication across this divide. The process was organized as part of a “Sadhu Sangho”—a spiritual meeting of Sadhus.



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## Research Questions

- How can the ineffable sphere of Sadhus' knowledge be evoked?
- What is the nature and the quality of their response to questions posed by a literate culture?

## Participants

- 10 married couples (male and female) who gathered at a spiritual meeting.
- The spiritual meeting lasted for 24 continuous hours and involved discussions, sharing of food, singing, and periods of rest.

## Tools

- Social Domain
- Freelisting
- Ranking
- Rating

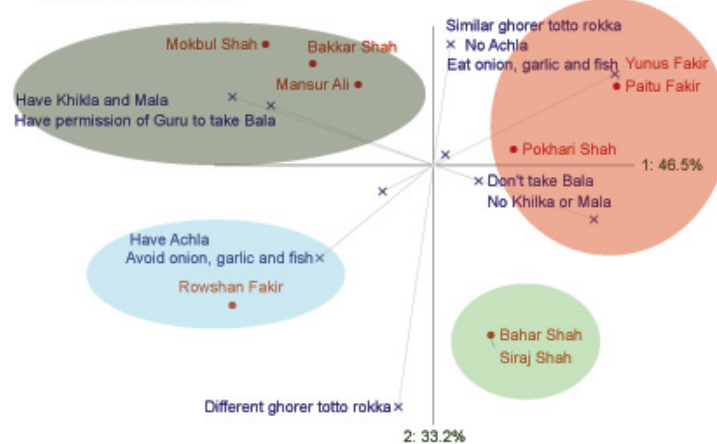
## Examples of Process Results

### Step #1–Understanding Sadhus

**Social Domain** was used with the Sadhus to help evoke meaningful differences and similarities amongst themselves. The Sadhus compared and contrasted themselves as pairs (male and female) in relation to key practices of particular Lalon schools, eventually forming groups or “families” with similar characteristics. Participants identified four major families which distinguished Sadhus in terms of dress, use of ornaments, ways of wearing their hair, and eating habits. The families were shown visually by sitting together. These distinctions led to a discussion of the ways different schools in the Lalon tradition emphasize particular ideas, such as:

- Ways of sharing knowledge with disciples
- Female symbols and related expressions of respect for the divine feminine
- Ways to express respect for life and morality.

Figure 1: Knowing the Sadhus



## Step #2—What is Life?

**Freelisting** and **ranking** were used to explore phrases that express the meaning of life. Each pair of Sadhus created a phrase expressing the meaning of life, written on a card by the facilitators. The phrases were:

1. Trees have life, therefore they give fruit.
2. I have followed the Guru. If Guru gets peace of mind, then I do, too.
3. Life means soul or own life.
4. Life means Roti—it will have to be accounted for.
5. Human beings have life, seeds have life, micro-organisms have life.
6. Life means one's own strength.
7. Life means to keep Guru Bakko (a spiritual practice).
8. Seed is life.
9. To preserve what is inside the Deho (body).
10. Follow what Guru says.

The phrases were compiled and discussed until three emerged as key. The Sadhus then ranked their preferences by distributing 10 seeds among the three phrases. Keeping Guru Bakko (a specific spiritual practice) was ranked highest, followed closely by “Life means one's own strength,” and “Trees have life, therefore they give fruit.”

## Step # 3—What does this picture mean?

**Freelisting** and **rating** were used to evoke key spiritual concepts. A photograph of a boy in a river was projected on a screen and Sadhus were invited to say what they felt when looking at the picture. Their statements were written on cards and then transferred to a large poster for discussion. Sadhus then rated each statement, using a yellow card for statements they agreed with and a blue card for statements they felt less strongly about. The highest agreement was on the statement “The boy follows Guru Bakko.”



## Outcomes

- A rich, metaphoric discussion was generated, unfolding areas that usually remain hidden or unspoken.
- It became apparent through the process that the language and metaphors were being interpreted through the profile of the individuals as well as in the collective and cultural context created by the spiritual congregation.

## Contributions of SAS<sup>2</sup>

- Participants found the exercises interesting and worthwhile. They said that it helped them to think and formulate responses that could be enriched through multi- and bilateral discussions.
- One Sadhu woman said “It was a very silly thing, but in the end some very deep meanings could come out.” They did not feel that the process violated any ethical rules or traditional practices of the Sadhus’ spiritual meeting.
- The quality of the responses cannot be assessed by the direct results, but rather by the degree of engagement in the process and the extent to which the exercises succeeded in evoking responses. Results are never direct, conclusive, or dogmatic.